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ABSTRACT

A Teacher Corps project to deliver staff development services focused on five educational settings: a correctional youth center, a high school, a junior high school, a youth group home consortium, and a college of education. It was felt that comparing the results of needs assessments conducted at each facility would enable useful analyses of common assessment factors and perceived priorities. Staff awareness and acceptance of the program was enhanced by involving school administrators and by presenting staff orientations. The process of developing the needs assessment varied for each site. Methods included individual interviews, group discussions, and questionnaires. The results showed both common and unique concerns among the diverse groups. Staff at all five sites expressed the need to redesign existing courses and create new curriculum materials and for students to become more responsible and better decision makers. It was concluded that a needs assessment must provide flexibility to deal effectively with both staff and administration in any given location. (FG)

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NEEDS ASSESSMENT AMONG DIVERSE GROUPS:

A CASE STUDY

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NEEDS ASSESSMENT AMONG DIVERSE GROUPS:

A CASE STUDY

Five distinct educational institutions are involved in a program of staff development. The sites range from a correctional center for incarcerated youth to an institute of higher education. The implementation of a needs assessment among these contrasting environments enabled an analysis of assessment factors common to each, an analysis of priorities perceived and suggests questions which should be considered by anyone responsible for a program of staff development.

A Teacher Corps project on youth advocacy at the University of Maine at Orono is implementing staff development programs for: the Old Town junior and senior high schools; the Maine Group Home Consortium, comprised of residents referred by the juvenile justice system, schools and the State Department of Human Services; the Maine Youth Center, a juvenile correctional facility; and the College of Education. This variety in delivering educational services offered a unique chance to explore the first phase of staff development, the needs assessment. Information will be provided on the awareness level, assessment model, instrument development, priorities identified and caveats to supervisors responsible for staff development.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT AWARENESS

Staff development is a term commonly used among educators today. The degree of participation in the activity, however,

runs from nonexistent to very involved. There are those who have never been involved in staff development and hope it will improve their effectiveness. There are those who have experienced some minor form and know there are many benefits, and there are those who have had a great deal of involvement and expect improvement. With this range, individuals in charge of staff development must produce programs which are collaborative and flexible. Staff development awareness is an important part of a needs assessment process and must be solidly embroidered into the overall plan of strategy. If this awareness is not achieved along with collaboration and flexibility, the program will be fragmented, success a remote possibility, and a great deal of time wasted.

a) Source of Authority

A first step in constructing the assessment agenda was to determine the source of authority which was sponsoring this activity. Top administration must be involved but their commitment may run the continuum from active to passive. At one site, staff development was mandated by the senior administration. At a second site staff meeting time was used to plan a needs assessment and the mandate was therefore implied. Since participation was voluntary at two sites, planning groups assumed the authority. The individual assigned to carry out the staff development program at the final site asked for initial authorization from the top administrator and then assumed responsibility for stimulating people to participate. As long as the group found the administration's goals compatible with the basic purpose of staff development,

there was little difficulty in conducting a needs assessment. One must be flexible enough to allow the same assessment to be carried out individually, in small groups or through representative committees.

b) Orientation

The first step was an orientation presentation given to the project Policy Board, whose membership included representatives from each site and level of educational personnel. The Policy Board recommended that the orientation be flexible according to the attitudes of staff and faculty at each location.

The second step was an orientation meeting at each project site to describe the purpose and scope of the Maine Youth Advocacy Project. Site personnel were requested to ask questions at any point during the presentations. There was much discussion and the issue regarding voluntary participation versus mandatory participation had to be resolved first before the staff development process could begin.

DESIGN OF ASSESSMENT

The design of the assessment was founded on a process outlined by Mehnert and Miller (1977) which emphasized the importance of collaboration, consultation and cooperative problem solving. An assessment instrument was used at each of the sites but the process in developing the instruments varied.

At the Maine Youth Center in South Portland, teachers were interviewed individually by a Teacher Corps staff member. Each individual was asked to talk about the needs of the educational component. This information was drawn into a survey by the Teacher

Corps staff liason and 10 members of the teacher advisory committee. The accumulation of data for the Group Home Consortium assessment instrument was facilitated by small group discussion with staff members at six group homes. The staff members from the Community School in Camden, Horizon House in Waterville, Atrium House and St. Michael's Center in Bangor, The Homestead Project in Ellsworth and The Lincoln County Group Home in Edgecomb all had input toward the design of the su vey. A six-member Group Home Planning Committee, representing resident staff needs approved the final document.

The survey instruments for the Joseph A. Leonard Junior High School and Old Town High School were developed by two Teacher Corps staff members in collaboration with the project advisory committees in both schools. The members of the committee had solicited input from individual teachers. An advisory committee at the University created the instrument for that faculty. At each site the personal involvement in designing the instrument helped foster the idea that the individual had a strong voice in determining both the content of the inservice programs and the delivery system.

ASSESSMENT RESULTS

The Teacher Corps staff tabulated results from each site location and discovered some common and unique concerns among these diverse groups.

The one need that arose across all five sites was the need to redesign existing courses and create new curriculum materials. There were other outstanding needs that the public

schools, youth center and group homes held in common. These were counseling, motivating, behavior management and reading skills. In addition, each site felt the need for students to accept responsibility for their own actions and to become better decision makers.

Examples of the most significant unique needs found were:

Correctional Youth Center - Reality Therapy training

High School - Mainstreaming in the classroom

Jr. High School - Securing parental cooperation

Group Homes - Group dynamics

University - Research design and statistical skills

This needs assessment process helped university faculty to zero in on which courses to redesign in order to address the priorities perceived by the public to be served. For example, the counselor education program is now exploring ways to provide every classroom teacher with a working knowledge of counseling skills. Traditionally, these skills have been provided exclusively to students involved in guidance and counseling programs.

An illustration of Teacher Corps response to the needs assessment was a staff development program at the Maine Youth Center. Dr. William Glasser, an expert on Reality Therapy, provided background information and led the staff through application exercises as an introduction to a five year experience in Reality Therapy training. Members of the University staff will be responsible for carrying out this program.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

Instead of proclaiming generalizations after analyzing this assessment case study, it seemed more appropriate to list questions people in charge of staff development should ask themselves.

1. Is there overall agreement on the basic purpose of staff development between the administration and the staff?
2. From which direction is the need for staff development coming - administration down or staff to administration?
3. As the person/committee in charge of the needs assessment, can you adequately field questions as to the scope of staff development possibilities, particularly in terms of money?
4. Do you have the resources to deliver the services?
5. What amount of staff time is needed to complete the instrument/interview/assessment process?
   a. Have you avoided redundancy?
   b. What minimum number of open ended questions should be encouraged?
6. If an institution is responsible for providing inservice training, does it have the flexibility to redesign courses and delivery systems for teachers in the field?
7. Have you discovered any hidden agendas in your assessment procedure? Are you prepared to deal with them?

SUMMARY

An assessment among diverse groups showed that it was important to identify the source of authority and recognize constraints this authority may impose on those involved in staff development.

The assessment also showed that the more information people had about the purpose and resources of staff development the easier it was for them to invest their time in assessment process. They felt they had some control over their destiny. In working with diverse groups, even if it is the difference between elementary and secondary teachers in the same system, a needs assessment must provide flexibility.

Beware of the danger of getting too involved in the intricacies of needs assessments and staff development programs. Don't forget the students.

Mehnert, Irene and Miller, James, "Building A Needs Assessment." Iambic Inservice: A New Rhythm in Teacher Education, New England Teacher Corps Network, Durham, New Hampshire, 1977.